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LOOK AT LINCOLN: Lincoln and the "Right to Rise"

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Feature Essay

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Williams, Frank J. *LOOK AT LINCOLN: Lincoln and the "Right to Rise"*.

A Just and Generous Nation: Abraham Lincoln and the Fight for American Opportunity

by Harold Holzer and Norton Garfinkle

Publisher:Basic Books

Retail Price: \$27.99

ISBN:9780465028306

The Library of Congress has estimated that a book about Abraham Lincoln has been published every five and a half days. It is obvious, since the bicentennial of Lincoln's birth in 2009, that rate has increased. It appears there may be one a day with over 16,000 books and pamphlets published about him since 1865.

But that is not to say that there is not room for more edifying books about the nation's 16th President. This is just such a book. Nothing compares to it since Gabor Boritt's *Lincoln and the Economics of the American Dream* (Memphis State University Press, 1978), which presented Lincoln's detailed economic concerns long before he became president and what America should become.

A Just and Generous Nation is actually two volumes in one. Harold Holzer, one of the foremost Lincoln scholars, presents in the first section an unassailable argument that Lincoln fought the Civil War "in pursuit of economic opportunity for the widest possible circle of hard working Americans." This required the destruction of slavery. Economist Norton Garfinkle follows this with a survey of political and economic history since Lincoln's death and compares policies of

subsequent American presidents to those promoted by Lincoln.

I believe in the late New York Governor Mario M. Cuomo's admonition that we should eschew political labels, e.g. "liberal," "conservative," etc. Yet, this book challenges that notion by making Lincoln a liberal Democrat and holding his successors to the same standard. It was Lincoln who strengthened the federal government by imposing the first income tax, conscription, support of the Homestead Act, and the transcontinental railroad. He also defined the powers of the president and that office's war powers. In attempting to answer what Lincoln would do today, one would be hard pressed to see Lincoln, according to this book, against favoring immigrants, raising taxes on the rich, and supporting education and healthcare with significant federal funds.

Of course, many Republicans do not see Lincoln this way. Yet Lincoln saw labor superior to capital and never was against the "right to rise." On the other hand, he didn't "believe in the law to prevent a man from getting rich." In his time there was a need for unskilled labor. Today, unskilled laborers are fortunate to find work, and even then wages have been falling. While most Americans today believe in racial equality, the gap widens. Just check Affirmative Action and voting rights disputes.

Former New York Governor Mario Cuomo's favorite Lincoln quotation on this subject, made in 1854, "The legitimate object of government is to do for a community of people, whatever they need to have done, but can not do, at all, or can not, so well do, for themselves in their separate, and individual capacities," underlies the authors' positions. Lincoln's economic spirit, from the very beginning of his political career, reflected support for "internal improvements" including education, canals, and railroads – the mantra of the Whig Party for which Lincoln labored assiduously. Creation of land grant colleges would come later as did the funding for the first transcontinental railroad.

The last part of the book surveys actions of presidents who followed Lincoln, like Theodore Roosevelt, Woodrow Wilson, Franklin D. Roosevelt, Lyndon Johnson, Harry Truman, and Barack Obama, who make the grade of following Lincoln's economic policies. Others, such as William Taft, Warren Harding, Calvin Coolidge, Herbert Hoover, Ronald Reagan, and George W. Bush come up short. Readers will have to make up their own minds about the nature of these presidents' economic policies and whether or not they achieved the vision advocated by both our Founders and President Lincoln.

Fifty years ago, historian David Donald wrote a well-known essay "Getting Right with Lincoln." Presidents have tried "to get right with Lincoln" by believing that their economic policies echo Lincoln's.

This is a provocative book, as I think the authors intended. In closing, one must ask Gabor Boritt's time honored question. Do we still have "the right to rise?"

Frank J. Williams is the Chair of the Lincoln Forum and author of Lincoln as Hero, and is a contributing columnist for Civil War Book Review.